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"Is Brussels a friendly place for gender equality?"

Hanbury Strategy Event

"Navigating the career maze - Women's journeys in Brussels"

Hanbury Strategy

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There is no perfect place on earth when it comes to equal opportunities for women. Sometimes when good moments come and we see more female faces among decision makers, leaders, game changers, we hope the change has come. But there is no guarantee, cultural or even legal, that this is a lasting change.

There is always the risk that gate keepers have only opened the door for a short moment, and the winds of history may slam the door again, because the paradigm of inequality continues to feel good. It is still women that need to prove to gate keepers that there is no reason not to let them in.

The good news is that these days Brussels is a place where you can see and feel that there are more women in leadership. I think there are 10 of them holding top leadership positions in Member States and in our neighborhood. There are clearly more colours on the family photos.

And this visible presence of women within the decision-making bodies contributes to changing and modernizing the image of politics. But we are not yet there. And this is in my view the most important issue. There is still a way to go, and this is not a walk in the park.

In spite of this small change in the image of politics, more colourful jackets on family photos in Brussels, we have not yet reached a critical mass in inclusive leadership.

We need more women with their collective wisdom as driving force for moving to the new world and bring down the era of populism and demagoguery. In short, the biggest challenge facing women working in Brussels is that we need more women among those who decide about our future, not just by accident, but as a well-established trend. But unfortunately, it is also in Brussels where you can realize that there are still so many national pathetic political stages dominated by the same male faces repeatedly. So, it is rather sad that we need women in leadership positions to give us hope for equality.

It is actually legitimate to ask why Brussels is a friendly place for gender equality, both institutionally and politically. It provides an environment of greater sensitivity to issues of equality in human rights. It is also a place where those caring about equality have a tool, through legislation, and recently there were many important pieces of it, to move the world forward for a large number of women. Also, through international trade agreements we provide hope for cohorts of women around the world.

If you ask me, however, if there are in Brussels situations when women and men are not treated with the same respect for their potential, I will say, yes, there are. We hear far too often in the recruitment process this frustrating message that there are no women that would meet the leadership criteria. This is because criteria are decided by men dominated institutions.

Brussels is also a place where you are often defined as a part of concrete political family. On gender equality there are major differences between political parties but also within them. So, there are political bubbles, and it takes courage to cross the barriers between the bubbles. Without this courage it is difficult to create the critical mass to change the status quo.

I have always been in my professional life on a public mission and in leadership positions. In my home country, in the government, bringing Poland to the European Union, in the UN running the UN Economic Commission for Europe in Geneva, in the European Union in different institutions. Most of the time in a multicultural environment. But I have never seen it as an obstacle to my mission.

My experience tells me that gender discrimination in an international environment does not come from cultural differences. It comes from cultural commonalities. The

anti-female attitudes are implanted into people's minds, often by women or accepted by women, independently of what culture they are from.

Cultural pattern of lack of respect for women's potential is cross cultural and cross national. Surveys show that people question women's authority and competences more often than those of men. It translates into a huge waste of resources legitimized not by facts of life, but by the breach of human rights. For our common public good it is a lose-lose situation.

Many post COVID studies prove that women were affected more deeply by pandemic than men. Female employment fell more, at a faster pace and, generally, pandemic burdened women disproportionately. But Covid woke up the EU historic commitment to gender mainstreaming across various policies, including budgeting. Member states were expected to include gender concerns into national reconstruction plans and the use of all European funds. European Parliament strongly supported this renewed angle to European policies.

It is highly probable that in the future, when looking back at Covid times, we will see the pandemic not only as a huge public health crisis, but also as a milestone in the struggle for the empowerment of women. We also saw an increase in academic activism in this field, as well as a number of gender programs initiated by private companies. There were reports on women at work, indicating that 60% of women who did hybrid work felt they were excluded from meetings, while almost 50% worried that they did not get sufficient exposure necessary for career progression. Female hybrid employees reported less opportunities to speak in meetings and seeing their male colleagues taking credit for their ideas and efforts. This is actually not COVID specific, but rather a permanent feature.

The gender pay gap remains an issue. And of course, has consequences for the level of pensions. It is a result of a common acceptance of discriminatory structures and anachronistic conceptions of life. Only part of it comes from the way we negotiate our salaries. It is embedded in our mentality.

Being on public mission throughout my professional life I was never offered a chance to negotiate. I just assumed that in public sector there are no pay gaps. But I realized a number of times that enjoying the same salary somehow, I happened to work much

more than many of my colleagues with the same salary. So, it is a bit like with this abuse of inflation, price stays the same, just the content is reduced.

Pay gap is one of those issues that I believe can be solved only by law. Last March the European Parliament voted with an overwhelming majority a legal act strengthening the pay transparency as a way to achieve an equal pay.

I am a strong supporter of the view that to accelerate the process of equality, we need legal protection for women's rights through legal framework. EU has just joined the Istanbul Convention. Regulatory tools can speed up the process of moving away from inequality which is a civilizational shame.

Brussels, the place associated with the responsibility for the quality of our life has been awarded this year with the prize for European Capital of Inclusion and Diversity. Recently, for the first time we have three European institutions, the Parliament, the Commission and the Central Bank headed by women. In the EP we have 39,3% of female members, 7 out of 14 vice presidents, in the Commission 13 out of 27 Commissioners are women. I recently had a panel in my seminar on capital market where all seven panelists were women.

I would also say that it is not by accident that there are more women than ever holding top leadership positions. Politics is changing its features. Business is changing and women demand a greater representation in often green leadership. Culture is changing and societies are more collaborative. Challenges are often our planet wide. And I think women are fully aware that there is no planet B.